

Homily on Fatherhood
given on Holy Trinity Sunday June 18, 2011
by Fr. Brian Schieber

Happy Father's Day to all of our fathers! On the front page of the Topeka Capital Journal Saturday you might have seen the article emphasizing the importance of fatherhood. The article said children that grow up with fathers do better in school – they have a lower school drop out rate – and they have a lower rate of teen violence and delinquency.

The article pointed out, however, that fatherhood today is in a state of crisis. Certainly we have seen this in the church. The sexual abuse crisis is all about a failure of fatherhood. I don't know about you but I'm getting sick of hearing about spiritual fathers who have abused children God has given into their care. There are priests who have not fed, protected, and loved our children well enough these past years. I'm thankful that our Archdiocese is being vigilant about protecting children because the church should ultimately be the safest place for children.

But the problem is not only within the priesthood. The Topeka Capital Journal Internet article pointed out a staggering statistic - 24 million children live without a father at home compared to 8 million in 1960 – that's quadruple the number. 50% of men age 45 and under say they have at least one child born out of wedlock.

There are many in society today who simply think fatherhood is optional – nice to have, but we can live without it. We're kidding ourselves. We need our fathers.

So today, I want to speak to our fathers, and mention three qualities I think go into being a good father. First, we need to be men who keep our wedding promises. As a priest I'm married to the church for life – and I take my promises seriously – I promised to pray everyday for my people. Part of my promise of prayer includes offering a Mass intention at least once a week for the parishioners at MPH. I promised to live a chaste celibate life and to be obedient to the bishop. These are serious commitments.

Those of you who are married promised on your wedding day: "I take you to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life."

How's that going? "I'll be true to you." You married an individual woman. You have promised before God to be faithful to your spouse. A study called the Truth about Deception reports that infidelity occurs in 1/3 to 1/2 of all marriages in the US. Are we taking our vows before God seriously? Interestingly Pope Paul VI in *Humane Vitae* warned us that contraception would make adultery easier and would lead to higher rates of infidelity which undermine and destroy marriage. And that's exactly what's happened.

A second important quality of a good father – that's tied to the wedding vows is love. Love is not first and foremost an emotion or feeling. It's a decision – an act of the will –

love means to will the good of the other. Father's you are called to love your bride the way Jesus loves his bride. How did Jesus love his bride – he laid down his life for her. Look at the crucifix – men that's what we have to keep before us.

Do we understand love this way – one marriage counselor said – I often hear couples say things like – “I'm no longer getting what I need out of this relationship.” Love doesn't ask so much what am I getting but what can I give. Love is about losing yourself for the good of the other – not trying to manipulate or use someone to fulfill your own needs.

This marriage counselor said I also hear people say, “I think I've fallen out of love with my spouse.” Love properly understood isn't something you just fall in and out of – yes, emotions come and go. I'm sure there will be times that you don't feel like you love your spouse - people we live with get under our skin – they at times annoy us. At times growing up I didn't always feel like I loved my mom and dad or my brothers and sisters. Yet, even when the feelings aren't there – I can still choose to love – I can still choose to seek the good of the other.

On your wedding day you promised to love and honor your wife all the days of your life. Marriage is for life. We are called to be committed through good times and bad times – in sickness and in health. You know ultimately fathers – the best thing you can give your children is a good marriage. What children need most to flourish and grow is a stable home with 2 parents that love each other.

Finally, fathers we have to keep our spiritual promises. We have to be men of God. If you have baptized children - do you remember the priest saying to you: “You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him or her in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him or her up to keep God's commandments.” Then the priest said, “Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?” We have made promises to God to care for our children spiritually. One of the most important duties of fatherhood is spiritual fatherhood.

Google some time – the effect of father's not going to church. Based on a 1994 study in Switzerland– if the mother goes to church but the father doesn't only 33% of those children will grow up to be churchgoers. But if the father goes to church and the mother is non-practicing 67% of those children will grow up to be churchgoers. Spiritual fatherhood is so important. Why – from the time our children are young we teach them about God the Father – we teach them how to pray the Our Father – they then look to their own father as an example of faith.

I've had mothers come in and say, “Father I'm having trouble getting my teenagers to go to Mass.” The first question I ask is, “Does your husband go to Mass?” – “Well, no Father – he sleeps in on Sunday.” If a child thinks – my dad doesn't need God – it's a short step to start thinking – then why do I need God? Fathers we need to be going to Mass every Sunday – our children need to see us pray.

Last year, Msgr. Sweatland was leading our priest retreat and I remember he related a story of visiting a 2nd grade classroom in an inner city Catholic school. He was going to teach the children how to say the Our Father. He noticed a confused look on their face. He said, "How many of you live with you father at home." No one raised their hand. He said, "How many of you know your father?" One little girl raised her hand and said, "I visit him at jail." These children were having a difficult time coming to know God the Father's love because they had never experienced the love of their own father.

Fathers we have to be men of our word – faithful to promises made in marriage – faithful to promises made at the baptism of our children. And we must be men of love. Being a good father isn't about being Macho. Macho is all about ME and my wants. Being a father means being a man – being someone who uses his strength to lift others up, especially the wife and children God has given you. And the world, our families, the Church, and Jesus Christ all need us to live out our fatherhood well. Men, let's us be about our business.